

# Stalinism, Post-Stalinism, and Neo-Capitalism: To Be or Not to Be?

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## Biographical Statement

Alzo David-West earned a master's degree in English (multicultural literature) from East Carolina University and a bachelor's degree (*magna cum laude*) from Chowan University. His areas of academic interest are multicultural and transnational literature, literary theory and criticism, and North Korean studies. He is the news-briefs editor for *North Korean Review*, an instructor at Duksung Women's University in Seoul, South Korea, and a doctoral student in communication (media philosophy) at the European Graduate School, Switzerland.

## Abstract

This commentary examines the concepts of Stalinism, post-Stalinism, and neo-capitalism in the journalistic writings of Professor Andrei Lankov. A leading authority in the field of North Korean history, Lankov also writes articles and columns for a number of major media outlets. As a journalist, he has proposed that North Korea in the twenty-first century is no longer a Stalinist state, but a post-Stalinist authoritarian system that is characterized by the development of a neo-capitalist revolution. The paper suggests that contrary to these propositions and in spite of the objective tendency towards capitalist restorationism, North Korea may still be regarded as Stalinist, not because of attempts at "re-Stalinization," as Lankov has described, but on political and programmatic grounds.

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## Introduction

According to North Korea historian Andrei Lankov, North Korea is no longer a Stalinist state, the old Stalinist society is dead, a “neo-capitalist” revolution is under-way, and the country is proceeding to a market-oriented system. This thesis is advanced in Lankov’s *Asia Times Online* articles, such as “Cracks in North Korean ‘Stalinism’” (2004), “Welcome to Capitalism, North Korean Comrades” (2004), and “North Korea: Market Forces Have Female Faces” (2005), which were republished as a report in *Asia Policy* titled “The Natural Death of North Korean Stalinism” (2006). Lankov’s most recent book, *North of the DMZ* (2007), makes similar arguments, as it is a revised compilation of his newspaper columns for the *Asia Times Online* and *Korea Times*. The problems concerning Lankov’s theory of post-Stalinism begin with his definition of Stalinism. He employs the following criteria: (1) a brutal and repressive regime, (2) a centrally planned economy, (3) a Leninist party, and (4) a system of political thought control.<sup>1</sup> Here the modification or exclusion of a few of these criteria is sufficient to disqualify North Korea as being a Stalinist state. Lankov explains that North Korea was the “closest possible approximation of an ideal Stalinist state” and “in many regards it was far more Stalinist than Josef Stalin’s Russia itself” — until the economic crisis of 1991 to 1995 and the subsequent famine in 1996 to 1999, which resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the loss of economic subsidies.<sup>2</sup>

The changes in the North Korean economy, Lankov says, “have transformed the country completely and, perhaps, irreversibly.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, “one has to stretch the definitions in describing the North Korea of 2004 as ‘Stalinist,’” for even though it continues to be ruled by a repressive and brutal regime, the “peculiarities of Stalinism are now disappearing.”<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the second, third, and fourth criteria that Lankov identifies are the ones that are apparently withering away. While brutality and repressiveness are essential ingredients in Lankov’s conception of North Korean Stalinism, decisive for him are the nationalized-centralized economic structure of the state, the type of party that rules the state, and state monopoly of information. When one studies Lankov’s use of the phrase “Stalinism,” a number of other terms are found in synonym with it. These are “communism,” “central economy,” “socialism,” and “state-managed economy.” Lankov equates Stalinism with socialism, of which there are many different schools. His aforesaid reference to a Leninist party also suggests that he sees the contributions of Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) to classical Marxism — the theory of imperialism and the theory of the revolutionary party — as leading to Stalinism. Similar views can be found in the works of well-known anticommunist scholars such as Robert Conquest, Leszek Kolakowski, Martin Malia, Richard Pipes, and Dimitri Volkogonov. Thus, one should not assume that this is an original line of argument or that Lankov is its innovator.

## Stalinism and “Socialism in One Country”

Lankov summarizes his views on Stalinism on the *North Korea Zone* Web site in a December 13, 2006, anonymous exchange with the author, who wrote in response to Lankov’s online article “Stalinist Politics vs. Market Place Capitalism.” The correspondence provides two conflicting theories of Stalinism. In the first case, the reader defines Stalinism as a nationalist program of “socialism in one country”—not necessarily a totalitarian state regime—whose political and economic policies defend the nation-state system, thus making Stalinism, in the final analysis, related to capitalism, which upholds the world division of national states as well:

(1) Stalinism must be seen for what it is, namely, a *nationalist* pseudo-socialist political program based on the theory of “socialism in one country” and not exclusively as a case of a repressive-totalitarian regime. (2) The *nationalist* Stalinist two-stage theory, which the North Korean regime put into effect before the Korean War, permits a period of extended capitalist development under the auspices of the ruling dictatorial party. (The North Korean state bureaucracy had no choice but to change that course after the devastation of the war.) (3) Even when the *nationalist* Stalinist state has carried out complete socialization of the means of production *within* its national borders, the autarkic economic program and policies retard the productive forces, thereby laying the objective preconditions for capitalist restoration. (That is the fundamental lesson of the Soviet Union, Eastern Bloc countries, and China.) (4) Stalinism and capitalism, moreover, defend the *nation-state* form as an eternal socioeconomic political formation.<sup>5</sup>

In the second case, Lankov argues that the problem of Stalinism is one of “definition”; claims to assume a position “most others” have taken, for example, Seweryn Bialer; describes the author’s view as uninfluential Trotskyism; suggests that the internationalist policies of Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) and the nationalist policies of Joseph Stalin (1879–1953) would both have led to a brutal and repressive Communist Party–ruled centralized state; and, invoking the combined authority of Stalin and the late North Korean leader Kim Il Sung (1912–1994), says Stalinism is incompatible with capitalism.<sup>6</sup> One should note that the theory of “socialism in one country” was advanced by Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938) after Lenin died in January 1924. The phrase proper was used by Stalin in his December 1924 essay “The October Revolution and the Tactics of the Russian Communists,” a document in which he misrepresented the views of Lenin and attacked the internationalism of Trotsky, the coleader of the Russian Revolution.<sup>7</sup> As for the chances of political repression in the Soviet Union under a Trotsky leadership, there is no question that an internationally isolated, poverty-stricken, Civil War–ravaged Soviet Russia would have, in spite of Trotsky’s internationalism, descended into some form of dictatorship. Trotsky himself more or less acknowledged that possibility in his journal *Bulletin of the Opposition* (*Biulleten’ oppositsii*):

[The dictatorship of the proletariat is] not an absolute principle which logically produces benign or malignant consequences, but [a] historical phenomenon which, depending on concrete conditions, both domestic and foreign, can develop

in the direction of workers' democracy and the full abolition of power, as well as degenerate into a Bonapartist apparatus of oppression.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the possibility of a Soviet Bonapartist regime arising under Trotsky, that is, a dictatorial regime of crisis,<sup>9</sup> counterfactuals appear in terms of the historical record, and these go back to the nature of the Leninist party. There were, in particular, such fundamentally irreconcilable policy outlooks and orientations (cultural, domestic-foreign, and economic) between Stalin and Trotsky, making it conceivable that had Stalin not seized power after Lenin's death and advanced the nationalist program of "socialism in one country," Comintern policies would have, to consider a few what-ifs, been more favorable for the prospects of the socialist revolution in China in 1925 to 1927 and could have prevented the rise of Mao Zedong (1893–1976) in the Chinese Communist Party; alternative Comintern policy would have urged the strategic unity of the German Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party—both of which had won the loyalty of the powerful German working class—against fascism and the middle-class social layers who brought Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) to power in 1933; and the Moscow Trials of 1936 to 1938, a mass judicial frame-up of orthodox Marxists and leaders of the Russian Revolution under the charge of "Trotskyism," would not have occurred. The basic distinction is that the international socialism of Trotsky was based on the programmatic perspective of world economy and the permanent revolution, whereas the national socialism of Stalin advanced the general line of "an economically self-reliant, independent country based on the home market," as the Soviet dictator put it at the Fourteenth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1925.<sup>10</sup> (That is the same political line of the *Juche* national subjectivist ideology in North Korea.) The nature of the Soviet Communist Party itself was also vastly divergent under Lenin and Trotsky's international class-based perspective than it was under Stalin's national state-based perspective.

Drawing from previously unavailable materials in the Soviet archives, senior Sovietologist Moshe Lewin has explained in *The Soviet Century* that Lenin's revolutionary party in its original incarnation, far from being a dictatorial apparatus, was a highly principled, antiauthoritarian, egalitarian, and democratic organization, whose members were accustomed to the traditions of discussion, debate, and accountability, respecting the rights of the minority within the party to comment on or rebut the majority position.<sup>11</sup> The Russian Civil War (1918–1921) and foreign intervention effectively destroyed the party, changing its social composition and creating "two very different political and cultural universes within it," which led to the growth of the conservative nationalist bureaucracy and to Stalin's consolidation of power.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Lewin notes that Stalin harbored deep personal and political animosity against Lenin, a sentiment that preceded the Civil War and which was indirectly fed by Stalin's obsessive hatred of Trotsky.<sup>13</sup> That consuming hatred assumed a pathological and genocidal character against the so-called "Trotskyists," the Marxist opponents of the bureaucracy.

## Neo-Capitalist Revolution or Capitalist Restoration

With the above in view, one may turn to Lankov's conception of "North Korean neo-capitalism" and the neo-capitalist "revolution" that he frames in the general theory of post-Stalinism. What does this "neo-capitalism" look like? Lankov describes a number of developments that have occurred in North Korea since the crisis of the 1990s—namely, barter trade, marketplaces, private canteens, food stalls and inns, illegal money-lending, prostitution, and smuggling. This, he explains, has led to the collapse of Stalinism from below and to the rise of a "merchant class," not to mention the enrichment of high-level cadres' wives, corrupt officials, and managers of state-run enterprises who illegally sell their products on the market.<sup>14</sup> Lankov has also referred to this as "post-socialist capitalism" and the "sudden and explosive growth of grassroots capitalist economy."<sup>15</sup> But this proliferation of small business activities and shady operations, coupled with rampant inflation in North Korea, does not appear to be a sign of "neo-capitalism" as such. Rather, the said developments, which represent an emerging economic force, are a primitive expression of a society moving in the inexorable direction of a profit-based exchange economy, beginning with the stimulation of small-proprietor, or petty-bourgeois, economy. Lankov has indicated that the said North Korean marketplaces are equivalent to those of South Korea in the 1950s. He also provides the case of a Chinese-connected North Korean businesswoman who says that "good relations" with the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), state security, and police are needed for successful cross-border trade, despite waning government control over the autarkic centralized economy.<sup>16</sup> The North Korean bureaucracy is, in other words, presiding over the budding capitalism.

Arguably, a system of "neo-capitalism" would signify something that is a qualitative advancement over other forms of capitalism. This is not the case in North Korea, and the related developments do not constitute a genuine revolution. Revolutions, after all, are the objective products of socioeconomic contradictions that concentrate living, political energy in a historically rising social class, raise its social consciousness, lead to the development of revolutionary political leadership, involve masses of people, and culminate in a violent and fundamental break with the outmoded social, political, and economic institutions that form the basis of existence of the former, now historically outlived, ruling class. The old sociopolitical institutions are thereupon replaced with new and higher forms of social organization. Examples of this protracted and difficult process are seen in the anti-feudal bourgeois democratic revolutions of England (1640), America (1776), and France (1789). Observed from the standpoint of political history, world economy, the global division of labor, and transnational production, the present changes in North Korea and its structural reintegration into the international profit system are not confirmative of a revolution, much less a "neo-capitalist" revolution, but a return to the production relations of the past in the present-day situation.

Japanese colonization in 1910 extended the infrastructure of international capital to the Korean Peninsula, and modern capitalism began to develop in the early 1920s. Colonial-capitalist development, however, was disrupted in the aftermath of

the Great Depression and Second World War with the joint U.S.–Soviet occupation and division of Korea on August 15, 1945, and the establishment of two politically irreconcilable regimes in the South and North in 1948. But rather than eliminating capitalism altogether in the north, the Soviet Stalinist occupation authority oversaw the implementation of the old Menshevik two-stage theory — which was reformulated in the 1935 “popular front” policy and in the mid-1940s “people’s democracy” theory — whereby a class-collaborationist “bourgeois-democratic revolution” would precede the “socialist revolution” and ostensibly lay the basis for a self-contained national socialism. The bureaucratic liquidation of capitalist relations in North Korea, including the limited capitalism under the two-stage model, was hastened in response to the devastating Korean War (1950–1953). Lankov argues otherwise in the *North Korea Zone* exchange, claims that the shortness of the transition was apropos of Stalin’s last publication, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.* (1952)— that crude mechanistic work is actually concerned with the more advanced Soviet “transition from socialism to communism” as being in process<sup>17</sup>— and he says that the North Korean situation arose as it did “not because NK was in [a] desperate state after the war ... the country’s destitution could be as easily used to justify the slowing down of the socialist/communist transformation.”<sup>18</sup> Kim Il Sung provides the following explanation for the postwar policy turn from the stage of bourgeois-democratic revolution in his April 14, 1965, lecture at the Ali Archam Academy of Social Sciences of Indonesia:

After the war, the *socialist transformation of capitalist trade and industry* became a more urgent requirement. The war damage rendered capitalist trade and industry nearly non-existent, and even the remaining part was mostly reduced to fragmented economy with little to distinguish it from handicraft and small trade. Right after the armistice, the entrepreneurs and traders of our country found themselves in a position where they could neither restore their economy nor improve their livelihood, without relying on the socialist economy and pooling their efforts.”<sup>19</sup>

A similar point is made in Kim’s September 17, 1972, discussion with Japanese journalists of the *Mainichi Shimbun*:

Now that everything was ravaged by the war, there was little difference between the small and medium entrepreneurs and the urban handicraftsmen. Everyone became a proletarian, so to speak. They had to pool their efforts and go along the road to socialism, this was the only way for them to subsist. In order to shore up their completely devastated agriculture, the peasants, too, had to do the same.”<sup>20</sup>

While Kim claimed that the massive U.S. saturation bombing campaign during the Korean War had destroyed capitalism in North Korea and that the resultant destitution proletarianized the entire population — thus necessitating the ultra-leftist Stalinist policies of rapid industrialization and forced collectivization, that is, the Chollima Movement (1956–1961)— he was also motivated by a political struggle to retain his hold on state power in face of the tactical Soviet “de-Stalinization” campaign of bureaucratic reform (which orthodox Stalinists like Kim and Mao denounced as “modern revisionism”), internal WPK opposition to his rule, the emerging Sino-

Soviet dispute, and the threatening U.S. military presence in South Korea and Japan. Kim Il Sung and his orthodox Stalinist supporters in the WPK were, therefore, in a quite precarious state after the wartime catastrophe, and, confronted with an inner-party bureaucratic-reformist opposition, they were not likely to commit collective political suicide by justifying any slowdown in the two-stage transition to the “socialist revolution.” The intentions of the “Kimilsungists” were to some extent foreboded in Kim’s anti-Soviet reformism *Juche* speech of December 28, 1955, and thereafter actualized in the North Korean Great Purge of 1956 to 1960, from which, as Lankov notes, the country emerged as “one of the most efficient Stalinist regimes ever to have existed.”<sup>21</sup>

Consequent to the abovementioned developments, North Korea existed for half a century outside the structural operations of postwar global capitalism and the international market, retaining also a certain degree of political independence from the USSR and China. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the disappearance of Comecon trading bloc (North Korea was not a member of Comecon but had trade relations with Comecon countries), the post-Soviet economic crisis, development of capitalist special economic zones (SEZs), the July 1, 2002, price and wage reforms, and the stirring of small-proprietor economy represent an irreversible revival of the erstwhile capitalism. Reudiger Frank observes that there is “a rich fund of research, newspaper reports and propaganda in the DPRK that both emphasize market reforms and attempt to provide a way to embrace these new developments and their results *without abandoning the prevailing ideology*.”<sup>22</sup> The *Juche*-Stalinist ideology of the North Korean bureaucracy thus remains intact, and tactical redefinitions in its program are presented in the terms of the policies of “new thinking” (*saeroun kwanjŏm*), “our-style socialism” (*urisik sahoejuŭi*), and practical/profit socialism (*silli sahoejuŭi*), not to mention in the anti-working class orientation of Kim Jong-il’s military-first policy (*sŏn’gun chŏngch’i*) and military-first ideology (*sŏn’gun sasang*). The objective tendency toward capitalist restorationism does not necessarily forecast a position of strength for the country, however.

The economic indices and geographic size of North Korea — Lankov puts the population and per capita GNP on par with that of impoverished Mozambique<sup>23</sup> — reveal that it is too poor and too small and has arrived too late in the international competition for markets, resources, and spheres of influence. That struggle is dominated by the advanced Western countries and is being increasingly influenced by capitalist China, Russia, and India. Considering that “the entire economy of the DPRK is approximately  $\frac{1}{35}$  that of the South, with the Gross National Income (GNI) a mere  $\frac{1}{17}$  the level seen in the ROK,”<sup>24</sup> and is dependent on Chinese and South Korean economic assistance, the transition to capitalism in North Korea signifies the probable turn to a “third-world” style system of dependence on financial credits, foreign investment, sale of cheap labor and natural resources, and deep-going social polarization at home. A reinvigoration of the North Korean national economy, which is not impossible, should be seen relative to this. Such a reinvigoration, of course depending on risk reduction in order to attract foreign companies, presupposes a clear vehicle for investment, no negative profits resulting from the opposition of labor, and a pliant

and disciplined workforce. The SEZs, which reintegrate the state into world capitalism and provide a glimpse of the requisite processes and controls in an embryonic phase, are the starting point for North Korean economic development under capitalism. Furthermore, they simultaneously serve as a “survival strategy” for the North Korean bureaucracy, following the precedent of the Chinese and Vietnamese Stalinists.

Briefly, there is in attendance to Lankov’s conception of revolutionary “neo-capitalism” in North Korea the notion that “market forces have female faces,”<sup>25</sup> an idea that is problematic in both economic and metaphoric terms. Market forces are objective economic phenomena that operate independently, though not absolutely, of human consciousness and the subjective urges of the individual. Lankov, who instructively observes that North Korean women were the first to plunge into market activity because of their social and cultural position in North Korean society, has, however, personified and genderized objective socioeconomic processes in female biology. This is awkward. Human social activity reacts to the objective progression or deterioration of the forces of production and the means of production, the structural dislocations and reconfigurations of which in North Korea are being reflected in certain sociological changes. Rather than women embodying market forces—which might work as a metaphor if women in the country constituted a propertied capitalist class—they are self-adapting, like everyone else around them, to the material necessity of petty trade for their individual survival and the survival of their families in the dysfunctional and penurious North Korean state. Moreover, the patriarchal social structure and patriarchal social consciousness of the state are still intact, despite the active role of women in small business and the changing character of the family as wrought by the economic crisis.<sup>26</sup> Lankov will probably maintain that the phrase “market forces have female faces” is meant rhetorically or perhaps ironically, but that does not alter the fact that it is an unsuitable metaphor because it is misleading from the standpoint of political economy.

## Conclusion

The transition to capitalism in Stalinist North Korea is neither a qualitative advancement nor a “neo-capitalist” revolution, but a capitalist restoration that has been logically and structurally predetermined by the decades-long degradation of the socioeconomic infrastructure under the program of national autarky, and exacerbated by the loss of Soviet economic aid and the divestiture of trade with the Comecon countries. Andrei Lankov, one should note, does concede in *North of the DMZ*, albeit in passing, that although the Stalinist centralized economy in North Korea has collapsed, the “political structure [of the state] still remains largely Stalinist.”<sup>27</sup> But is this not stretching the definition of Stalinism, which he admonishes against? If North Korea is politically Stalinist, how can North Korean Stalinism be dead, and how can North Korea be a post-Stalinist state, as has been argued? Perhaps Lankov means to say that North Korea is a capitalist state with Stalinist excrescences or Stal-



inist vestiges; yet that would imply that economic relations in the country have been converted to those of a system of private property and production relations based on the principle of profit maximization. Despite the growth of private trade, capitalist “reform” measures, significant erosion of the “command economy,” and more decentralized decision making in state planning, the North Korean state is not a market-oriented system.

Prior to conceding that Stalinism survives in North Korea, Lankov described the October 2005 revival of the Public Distribution System and restrictions on grain sales to free markets as an attempt at “re-Stalinizing” the country, a crackdown on the “neo-capitalist economy,” in order to preserve the privileges and security of the state bureaucracy.<sup>28</sup> What is occurring is, indeed, meant to perpetuate the existence of the state bureaucratic caste, but it is not a case of “re-Stalinization.” These are tactical measures implemented within the preexisting Stalinist political perspective and program of the North Korean leadership, who rule over a transitional society of dubious historical viability. The bureaucracy may here be seen as entrenching itself and forestalling full-blown capitalist relations until its survival can be ensured without the existence of nationalized industry and state planning methods. The journalistic theory of post-Stalinism and its corollary “neo-capitalism” are problematic in interpreting the deformed North Korean state because they do not consider the mutations of postwar national-Stalinism and the conditions of its evolution in the post-Soviet epoch. Lankov claimed that revolutionary changes were occurring in North Korea, that its leaders did not have the “political will” to revive Stalinism, and that the Stalinist system had died.<sup>29</sup> He has somewhat modified these arguments,<sup>30</sup> and he now says that “the answer is pressure from within, by nurturing pro-democracy and pro-reform forces within North Korean society.”<sup>31</sup> “The only real hope is in the form of transformation from below — a revolution.”<sup>32</sup> This political nurturing and belated capitalist “revolution” are to come about with the governments of the Western countries applying a “soft power” approach to North Korea. That, however, is a prescription for foreign regime change, not a revolution.

## Notes

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